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ABSTRACT

This paper synthesizes research, theories, and practical knowledge from developmental psychology and sociology to provide a basis for understanding, planning, and implementing effective and supportive partnerships between human-services providers and families. A family-centered approach is a process for delivering services to families, a philosophy based on an ecological model of the family. The ecological model builds and promotes families' existing strengths. Key components of the ecological model include creating partnerships and helping relationships; building the community environment; and linking families and community support. The ecological model borrows from systems theory (the notion that children must be understood in the context of their family relationships) and the "goodness of fit" child-development model (which seeks to improve the match between the needs of families with community resources and support). The paper also presents an overview of how the ecological paradigm has translated into practice--in Head Start programs, early intervention programs, family support programs, and the public schools. (Contains 39 references.) (LMI)

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THE Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

PROGRAM REPORT

THE ECOLOGY OF THE FAMILY

A Background Paper For A Family-Centered Approach to Education and Social Service Delivery

Prepared by
Christie Connard
with Dr. Rebecca Novick

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For A Family-Centered Approach To Education
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Prepared by
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 1

An Historical Footnote 1
A Process, Not A Method Or Content 1

KEY CONCEPTS OF AN ECOLOGICAL MODEL 2

The Family As A System 2

A DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE: GOODNESS OF THE FIT MODEL 6

Child Development 6
Family Development 7
Behavior As A Complex Interaction Of Factors 7
The Developmental Trajectory: Risk And Protective Factors 8
The Ecological Model: From Theory To Practice 10
Head Start Programs 10
Early Intervention Programs 10
Family Support Programs 11
Public Schools 12

BIBLIOGRAPHY 14

INTRODUCTION

The goal of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory's Integration of Education and Human Services Project is to increase the ability of education and human services providers to form partnerships with each other and with the families they serve.

This background paper presents the research, theories, and practice knowledge which provide a foundation for understanding, planning, and implementing effective and supportive partnerships.

An Historical Footnote

This paper is a synthesis of information from developmental psychology and sociology primarily. It draws from the literature of these fields at a time of change in both fields. In the last twenty years, child-oriented research in developmental psychology has evolved dramatically. It has moved from studies of the child in isolation to studies of one-way, caregiver to child developmental influences. Next, researchers began to consider reciprocal relationships, the way a child influences his or her caregiver and vice versa. Currently, developmental psychologists are studying how development is shaped by complex, reciprocal child-father-mother-sibling interactions.

While developmental psychology has focused on child-adult relationships, sociology has been concerned with marital relationships and the family as a whole in a social context. Recognizing the need to look at the family from both perspectives simultaneously, both fields are looking at child and family development in new ways. The coming together of these two areas of research has resulted in the adoption of an ecological framework.

The summary that follows is intended to familiarize practitioners working with families with some key concepts, rather than provide in-depth understanding. Much of the richness and detail of the research and theory has been left out. Those wishing to understand the evolution and complexities of the ecological model more fully will find this information in the sources listed in the bibliography.

A Process, Not A Method Or Content

A Family-Centered Approach is a PROCESS for delivering services to families that will fit many different "content areas," be it support for teen parents, family literacy or education for low-income children. It is not a set of particular practices but rather a "philosophy" in which families are recognized as having unique concerns, strengths and values. A Family-Centered Approach represents a paradigm shift away from deficit-based, medical models that discover, diagnose and treat "problems" in families to an ecological model. The ecological model which is the theoretical foundation for a Family-Centered Approach, is described below. It views families from the perspective of "a half-full cup" rather than half empty. This approach builds and promotes the strengths that families already have. The key components of a Family-Centered Approach are:

- **Creating partnerships and helping relationships.** Families are supported and child development is enhanced through helping and partnership relationships.

- **Building the community environment.** Families gain information, resources and support through their connections to the community environment.
- **Linking families and community support**. Participation, two-way communication, and advocacy strengthen both the community support network and family functioning.

The ecological paradigm is still emerging. It represents a integration of research and theory from developmental psychology and sociology, with experiential knowledge from social work, family support, early intervention and early childhood education. It represents a coalescing of what researchers are learning about the way different social environments and relationships influence human development. Because it is a new model with many as yet unexplained elements, the ecological model is still in a state of flux. However, the basic tenets of the ecological model have been established for some time and can be stated as:

- Human development is viewed from a person-in-environment perspective.
- The different environments individuals and families experience shape the course of development.
- Every environment contains risk and protective factors that help and hinder development.
- Influence flows between individuals and their different environments in a two-way exchange. These interactions form complex circular feedback loops.
- Individuals and families are constantly changing and developing. Stress, coping and adaptation are normal developmental processes.

(adapted from Whittaker & Tracy, 1989, p. 49-51)

KEY CONCEPTS OF AN ECOLOGICAL MODEL

A focus on the individual, isolated and independent, is deeply embedded in our culture and values. In contrast, an ecological model emphasizes the interconnections of events and the bi-directionality of effects between organism and environment. An ecological perspective views human development from a person-in-environment context, emphasizing the principle that all growth and development take place within the context of relationships. Thus, a child must be studied in the context of the family environment and the family must be understood within the context of its community and the larger society. The language of the ecological model provides a sharp contrast to the image of the lone frontiersman pulling himself up by his bootstraps, the "paddle my own canoe" mentality upon which our legal, educational, and social service delivery system are often based.

The Family As A System

From an ecological perspective, the most logical model of a family is a system. While there are critics of this conceptualization (Hinde, 1989), most researchers now approach the family from what could be loosely called a "systems perspective" (Kreppner & Lerner, 1989). A systems approach to human development considers the way relationships within the family and

between the family and social environment influence individual development and family functioning.

Systems theory has guiding principles that apply to all kinds of systems including business and industry, community organizations schools and families. These principles are helpful in understanding how families function and how families and communities interact. Some principles of systems relevant to a Family-Centered Approach are:

- **Interdependence**. One part of the system cannot be understood in isolation from the other parts. Children cannot be understood outside the context of their families. Any description of a child has to consider the two-way patterns of interaction within that child's family and between the family and its social environment. Describing individual family members does not describe the family system. A family is more than the sum of its parts.
- **Subsystems**. All systems are made up of subsystems. Families subsystems include spousal subsystem, parent-child subsystems and sibling subsystems. A family's roles and functions are defined by its subsystems (Fine 1992; Stafford & Bayer, 1993, Walsh, 1982).
- **Circularity.** Every member of a system influences every other member in a circular chain reaction. A family system is constantly changing as children develop; thus it is almost impossible to know for certain the causes of behavior.
- **Equifinity.** The same event leads to different outcomes and a given outcome may result from different events. What this suggests is that there are many paths to healthy development and there is no one-best-way to raise children (Stafford & Bayer, 1993).
- **Communication.** All behavior is viewed as interpersonal messages that contain both factual and relationship information (Krauss and Jacobs, 1990).
- **Family Rules**. Rules operate as norms within a family and serve to organize family interactions (Krauss and Jacobs, 1990).
- **Homeostasis.** A steady, stable state is maintained in the ongoing interaction system through the use of family norms and a mutually reinforcing feedback loop (Krauss and Jacobs, 1990).
- **Morphogenesis.** Families also require flexibility to adapt to internal and external change. (Krauss and Jacobs, 1990).

Key Point:

A Family-Centered Approach borrows from family systems theory. Family systems theory gives us useful principles for studying children within the context of their family relationships. This framework requires us to stop operating as if children exist in isolation. Effective interventions understand and respect each family's system.

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The environments of a family ecology. A basic ecological premise stresses that development is affected by the setting or environment in which it occurs. The interactions within and between the different environments of a family make up the "ecology" of the family and are key elements of an ecological perspective. The environments of a family's ecology include:

- **Family**. The family performs many functions for its members essential to healthy development and mediates between the child and the other environments.
- **Informal Social Network**. A family's social network grows out of interactions with people in different settings; extended family, social groups, recreation, work. Ideally, this network of caring others shores up feelings of self-worth, mobilizes coping and adapting strategies and provides feedback and validation.
- **Community Professionals and Organizations**. A community's formal support organizations provide families with resources related to professional expertise and/or technology.
- **Society**. Social policy, culture, the economy define elements of the larger ecology that impact the way a family functions.

Environments help or hinder development. A given environment may be bountiful and supportive of development or impoverished and threatening to development. Negative elements or the absence of opportunities in family, school or community environments may compromise the healthy development of children or inhibit effective family functioning. Here are examples of different environments in a child and family's ecology and their impact:

- As children move out into the world, their growth is directly influenced by the expectations and challenges from peer groups, care-givers, schools, and all the other social settings they encounter.
- The depth and quality of a family's social network is a predictor of healthy family functioning. During normal family transitions all families experience stress. Just having someone to talk to about the kids over a cup of coffee, swap child care, or offer help with projects, buffers a family from the stresses of normal family life.
- Strong linkages between families and community organizations such as schools, open channels that allow vital information and resources to flow in both directions, support families, schools, and communities.
- The work environment, community attitudes and values, and large society shape child development indirectly, but powerfully, by affecting the way a family functions.

The ecology of a child. When considering the ecology of a particular child, one might assess the challenges and opportunities of different settings by asking:

- In settings where the child has face-to-face contact with significant others in the family, school, peer groups, or church:
  - Is the child regarded positively?
  - Is the child accepted?
  - Is the child reinforced for competent behavior?

- Is the child exposed to enough diversity in roles and relationships?
- Is the child given an active role in reciprocal relationships?

- When the different settings of a child's ecology such as home-school, home-church, school-neighborhood interact:
  - Do settings respect each other?
  - Do settings present basic consistency in values?
  - Are there avenues for communication?
  - Is there openness to collaboration and partnership?
- In the parent's place of work, school board, local government, settings in which the child does not directly participate, but which have powerful impact on family functioning:
  - Are decisions made with the impact on families and children in mind?
  - Do these settings contain supports to help families balance the stresses that are often created by these settings?
- In the larger social setting where ideology, social policy, and the "social contract" are defined:
  - Are some groups valued at the expense of others (Is there sexism or racism)?
  - Is there an individual or a collectivist orientation?
  - Is violence a norm?

  (Adapted from Garbarino, 1982)

The ecology of a family. We are used to thinking about the environments children experience, but the environments families encounter also contribute to child development by their impact on family functioning. In a community there may, or may not, be the resources and relationships a family needs. Within its community setting, each family fabricates its own web of support from the formal and informal resources available. A family may forge many connections, a few strong connections, or no connections at all to the community resources. These connections link families to the tangible and intangible resources of the community.

Just as the child's environment offers challenges and opportunities, community settings offer challenges and opportunities for healthy family functioning. Generalizations about family-community interactions found in the literature include:

- Rural families have few employment opportunities, lower economic well being, fewer educational opportunities and less access to health care and social services. Urban families, on the other hand, have higher crime rates, more impersonal ties, higher density, and noisier living conditions (Unger & Sussman, 1990).
- Many parents must cope with the threat of violent crime in their neighborhood. A family's response to demands and challenges from a community environment may promote or hinder family functioning and child development. Withdrawing emotionally, keeping children inside, and restricting child activity are coping

strategies parents use when faced with violence in their neighborhood, but they may also impede normal development. (Garbarino & Kostelney, 1993).

- Families are affected by how responsive community organizations are to family needs. Powell (1990) identifies five strategies that make early childhood programs more responsive to families. These include: increasing parent-program communication; giving parents choices between different programs; assessing family and child needs; redefining staff roles and using community residents; and involving parents in decision-making.
- The relationship between families and their community changes and evolves over time. The needs and interests of family members change over the life span. Issues of responsiveness also change with aging and stage of development.
- "Community" may refer to relationships and social networks as well as a physical location. (Unger & Sussman, 1990) A family's informal social support network often provides services that are more accessible, culturally appropriate and acceptable than the services offered by formal support systems (Gottlieb, 1988).

A DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE: GOODNESS OF THE FIT MODEL

An ecological perspective focuses on dynamic developmental processes including the way stress, coping and adaptation contribute to development. A useful concept for understanding this view of development is the "goodness of the fit" model. This model suggests healthy development and effective functioning depend on the match between the needs and resources of a child or family and the demands, supports and resources offered by the surrounding environment. The developing individual responds to the "environmental fit" through developmental processes associated with stress management, coping and adaptation.

Child Development

In terms of child development, the "goodness of fit" refers to the match between the developmental needs of children and the demands, resources and capacities of their family, school and community environments. Children adapt to specific demands and expectations from home, school and community as part of the developmental process. The attitudes, values, expectations and stereotypes other people have about how a child should be, or act, mold the child. The skills and competencies required of a child by home, school and community, also shape development. A child's behavior in the face of these demands will depend on his or her skills, resources, support and experiences (Lerner, 1993).

The behaviors expected of a child at home may be different than those a child's needs at school. It has been proposed, for instance, that differences in goals, priorities and expectations between home and school may contribute to low academic achievement of minority children (Powell, 1989; Bowman & Stott, 1994). The match between a child and home, school and community environments determines whether or not a given child is able to meet basic needs,

form nurturing and supportive relationships, and develop social competence, all of which greatly influence the child's life trajectory (Lerner, 1993).

Family Development

The "goodness of fit" model is useful for understanding how to support and strengthen families as well. Families develop too. They move through predictable developmental stages just as children do. Families must also respond to the demands and expectations from work, social groups, community institutions and the society as a whole. Stress builds when the resources and coping skills of a family are inadequate to meet the demands and expectations of the social environment. Family stress levels are a predictor of "rotten outcomes" for children. If stress increases beyond a certain point, for whatever reason, a family's ability to nurture its children decreases (Schorr, 1989).

Mismatches with the environment. A lack of fit or a mismatch can happen between children and their family or school environments or between a family and community environment. Problem behaviors in school may often be attributed to a mismatch between a child and the expectations of the school setting (Fine, 1992). Mismatches also happen when the home culture and values are at odds with the dominant values of the school environment. This poses a threat to the linkages between family and school. The threat is lessened when both sides are carefully respectful and recognize the importance and value of each to the child. When a mismatch occurs and a child is disruptive or a family needs outside help, it may not be due to a deficiency in the child or family. The mismatch may come from a lack of resources or support from the social environment.

Key Point:

A Family-Centered Approach incorporates the "goodness of the fit" model by seeking to understand and improve the match between the needs of children and their families with community resources and support.

Behavior As A Complex Interaction Of Factors

"When we examine the family from an ecological point of view, no one person or thing... can be realistically identified as the 'cause' of a problem" (Yerby, Buerkel-Rothfus & Bochner, 1990, p.63). Behavior from a ecological perspective, is more complex than stimulus A causes predictable response B. The environmental demands and the reciprocal relationships between people interact with individual characteristics in complex chains of influence that define behavior. Although parents have a profound influence on the ability of the child to develop in a healthy, competent manner, children also influence their parents' behavior. As Adolph Adler observed, "The child is the artist as well as the painting." Therefore, when dealing a child's acting out behavior, or addressing a family's financial need, professionals need to consider not only the individual but also contributing factors from the environment and interpersonal relationships.

Key Point:

A Family-Centered Approach seeks to strengthen family functioning. To do this, the factors contributing to the way a family functions need to be studied and understood.

The Developmental Trajectory: Risk And Protective Factors

Risk is a statistical concept used to predict the probability of negative outcomes. Resiliency and protective factors are the positive side of vulnerability and risk (Werner 1990). Risk and protective factors are found both within the child (temperament, physical constitution, intelligence, education) and/or within a child's environment (caring adults, high expectations, good schools, high crime levels).

A child or family's developmental trajectory results from the negotiation of risks on one hand, and the exploitation of opportunities on the other. A way to conceptualize these interactions is to think of an ever changing equation containing plus and minus numbers. At any given time two or more numbers may combine to bolster development in a positive direction or push development toward negative outcomes. If the "solution" of the equation were graphed repeatedly, over time, it would represent the life trajectory of an individual. For example, perhaps biology contributes to a child's high intellectual potential. This should set the course of the child's development in a positive direction. This potential could be unrealized or move the child in a negative direction if a school setting failed to provide an appropriate educational experience leading the child to drop out of school. We know the following about risk and protective factors:

- The presence of a single risk factor typically does not threaten positive development. In situations where a child is vulnerable, the interaction of risk and protective factors determines the course of development.
- If multiple risk factors accumulate and are not offset by compensating protective factors, healthy development is compromised (Schorr, 1989; Werner & Smith 1992).
- Poverty increases the likelihood that risk factors in the environment will not be offset by protective factors (Schorr, 1989).
- When a child faces negative factors at home, at school, and in the neighborhood the negative effect of these factors is multiplied rather than simply added together (Werner & Smith, 1992; Schorr, 1989).
- Resiliency studies explain why two children facing similar risks develop differently. A core of dispositions and sources of support, or protective factors, that can buttress development under adverse conditions have been identified (Benard, 1991; Bogenschneider, Small & Riley; Werner & Smith, 1982, 1990, 1992).
- Dispositions that act as protective factors include an active, problem-solving approach and a sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy. Resilient children are characterized by a belief in their power to shape and have an impact on their experience.

- Caring and support, high expectations, and opportunities for participation are protective factors for children found in families, schools and communities (Benard, 1991).

Protective factors. Protective factors reduce the effects of risk and promote healthy development. Protective factors influence the way a person responds to a risk situation. The protective factor is not a characteristic of the person or the situation, but a result of the interaction between the two in the presence of risk. The presence of protective factors helps to change a developmental trajectory form a negative direction to one with a greater chance of positive outcome. Following are some examples of the ways protective processes redirect a developmental trajectory:

- If a child with a genetic disability has supportive nurturing caregivers, the developmental impact of the disability is reduced (Shonkoff & Meisels, 1990).
- A teen mother's strong social support network reduces risks to the mother-child relationship (Schorr, 1989).
- If a child has one strong parent-child relationship, the risk associated with marital discord is reduced (Rutter, 1987).

Application to a family-centered approach. Knowledge of risks and protective factors is used in a Family-Centered Approach to promote the enhancement of nurturing environments for children in families, schools and communities. Rutter (1987) identifies four mediating mechanisms. These mechanisms act in ways which:

- Reduce the impact of risks
- Reduce negative chain reactions
- Maintain self-esteem and self-efficacy through relationships and task achievement
- Open opportunities for positive development

A word needs to be said here about emphasizing "prevention" or "promotion" approaches. Much of our thinking about how to work with families has been dominated by a treatment, prevention and promotion continuum. The continuum ranges from:

- **Treatment**: eliminate or reduce existing dysfunction (a deficit-based approach) to
- **Prevention**: protect against or avoid possible dysfunction (a weakness-based approach) to
- **Promotion**: optimize mastery and efficacy (a strength-based approach) (Dunst, Trivette & Thompson 1990).

A Family-Centered Approach rejects the treatment model in favor of a blending of prevention and promotion models. It uses strength-based, nondeficit strategies to strengthen and support family functioning.

The Ecological Model: From Theory To Practice

As is often the case, while the research substantiating the ecological model was slowly gathering, practitioners began to build programs that operationalized the model. Head Start, early intervention and family support programs were the first generation of programs to translate the ecological perspective into practice.

The key components of a Family-Centered Approach; creating helping and partnership relationships, building the community environment, and linking community resources, grow out of the experiences of these early programs. The first applications of the ecological perspective in programs for families resulted in:

- Recognition of the strengths and capabilities of families
- A redefinition of the parent-professional relationship toward greater collaboration and partnership with parents
- Service delivery practices blurring the traditional boundaries between social welfare, physical and mental health, and education

The following description of program contributions from Head Start, early intervention family support programs, and public schools gives a very brief overview of how the ecological paradigm translates into practices.

Head Start Programs

Based on evidence of the critical importance of early childhood, Head Start programs created a new model of support for the young child. During its 30 year history, Head Start programs have provided a model of ways to utilize protective processes to reduce the risks associated with poverty, prevent negative chain reactions that begin in early childhood and open new opportunities for children and their families. The key components of the Head Start model incorporated in a Family-Centered Approach include:

- A comprehensive approach to child development that combines health, education and social services
- A strong emphasis on parent participation in the program services and program administration
- A redefinition of professional roles toward greater collaboration and partnership with parents (Shonkoff & Meisels, 1990)

Early Intervention Programs

Early intervention programs for children with special needs are prevention programs to: reduce the impact of risks associated with genetic and developmental handicaps; avoid negative developmental chain reactions resulting from this risk; and open opportunities for children with special needs. Responding to research (Bronfenbrenner, 1974) showing that interventions involving the family were more effective than those working with the child alone, early intervention programs redefined the relationship between families and professionals. Early intervention programs developed ways to create effective parent-

professional partnerships that recognize a family's right to participate in decisions about their child as well as a family's need for information and support (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Rappaport, 1981, Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1988).

Key lessons learned from early intervention programs are the important role family values and family strengths play in efforts to nurture children with special needs. Parents are no longer treated as children to be schooled by experts who know what is best for their child, but as partners with different kinds of expertise. Early intervention programs have distilled guidelines for how to build strong parent-professional partnerships. These guidelines include:

- Recognizing the knowledge and expertise parents have about their child and that child needs
- Empowering parents, as a way to provide help and information and to increase a parent's ability to nurture children (Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1988)
- Negotiating a match between the family's values, needs and goals and the professional's approaches, priorities and services

Key Point:

A Family-Centered Approach addresses strengthening families from a nondeficit orientation that builds on the strengths that all families have. The values and guidelines for a Family Centered Approach that flow from a nondeficit, strength-based orientation and are summarized in the family support section below.

Family Support Programs

A set of assumptions and beliefs about families and service delivery principles has evolved from the application of ecological perspectives by family support programs. A Family-Centered Approach incorporates these. The program design and services of family support programs are very diverse. These programs strengthen families by offering information, resources and emotional support. Farrow, Grant, & Meltzer (1990) outline beliefs and assumptions about families that are reflected family support programs and in a Family-Centered Approach as well.

- All families need help at some time in their lives, but not all families need the same kind or intensity of support.
- A child's development is dependent upon the strength of the parent/child relationship, as well as the stability of the relationship among the adults who care for and are responsible for the child.
- Most parents want to and are able to help their child grow into healthy, capable adults.
- Parents do not have fixed capacities and needs; like their children, they are developing and changing and need support through difficult, transitional phases of life.

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- Parents are likely to become better parents if they feel competent in other important areas of their lives, such as jobs, in school, and in their other family and social relationships.
- Families are influenced by the cultural values, and societal pressures in their communities (Farrow, Grant, & Meltzer, 1990, p. 14).

These beliefs and assumptions about families guide the delivery of services by family support programs. The service delivery principles of family support programs are grounded in the practical experiences of serving families and are an important part of a Family-Centered Approach. Effective services for families should reflect these family support principles:

- Programs work with whole families rather than individual family members.
- Programs provide services, training and support that increase a family's capacity to manage family functions.
- Programs provide services, training and support that increase the ability of families to nurture their children.
- The basic relationship between program and family is one of equality and respect; the program's first priority is to establish and maintain this relationship as the vehicle through which growth and change can occur.
- Parents are a vital resource; programs facilitate parents' ability to serve as resources to each other, to participants in program decisions and governance, and to advocate for themselves in the broader community.
- Programs are community-based, culturally and socially relevant to the families they serve; programs are often a bridge between families and other services outside the scope of the program.
- Parent education, information about human development, and skill building for parents are essential elements of every program.
- Programs are voluntary; seeking support and information is viewed as a sign of family strength rather than as an indication of difficulty. (adapted from Carter, 1992).

Public Schools

Traditionally, public schools have not had a strong emphasis on family involvement and support. Schools of education have typically offered little direct training in forming parent/teacher relationships. A 1987 University of Minnesota report on improving teacher education listed what researchers identified as the thirty-seven most important teaching skills; learning how to work with parents was not among them (Louv, 1992). However, a number of factors have contributed to the current focus on parental involvement as a way to improve educational outcomes for all children, particularly children from low-income families.

During the last 20 years, vast economic and demographic changes have resulted in increased economic hardship and stress for many families and an accompanying pressure on schools to increase our nation's competitiveness in a global economy. There is growing recognition that fostering "readiness" for kindergarten and for succeeding educational environments will

require addressing the strengths and needs of the whole child. The National Education Goals Panel endorsed a complex, multifaceted definition of readiness, which includes physical well-being and motor development, social competence, approaches toward learning, language and literacy, cognitive development, and general knowledge (NEGP, 1994). This comprehensive definition requires a new approach to schooling, one which includes a shared responsibility for children's development and "will likely permanently alter the school's relationship with families and communities" (Kagan, 1992, p. 8).

Recognizing the vital role that parents play in their children's education, Title IV of the National Education Goals 2000: Education America Act encourages and promotes parents' involvement in their children's education, both at home and at school. Three decades of research have demonstrated strong linkages between parental involvement in education and school achievement (Riley, 1994). Family involvement is highest among middle-and upper-class families. However, regardless of parents' education, parental involvement with children's schooling is associated with better attendance, higher achievement test scores, and stronger cognitive skills. In addition, when parents help elementary school children with their schoolwork, social class and education become far less important factors in predicting the children's academic success (Dauber & Epstein, 1993).

Low-income, minority, and limited-English-proficient parents, however, may face numerous barriers when they attempt to collaborate with schools. These include: lack of time and energy; language barriers, feelings of insecurity and low self-esteem, lack of understanding about the structure of the school and accepted communication channels, cultural incongruity, race and class biases on the part of school personnel, and perceived lack of welcome by teachers and administrators (Fruchter, et al., 1992; SREB, 1994).

Given these potential barriers, it is not surprising that research has demonstrated that successful parent involvement programs must have a strong component of outreach to families. Studies show that school practices to encourage parents to participate in their children's education are more important than family characteristics, such as parent education, socioeconomic and marital status (Dauber & Epstein, 1993). A 1988 study of parental involvement in schools concluded that it wasn't parents who were hard for schools to reach, but schools that were hard for parents to reach (Davies, 1994). If schools are to become places where families feel welcome and recognized for their strengths and potential (Riley, 1994), school personnel must not only embrace the concepts of partnership and parent involvement, they must be given training and support to translate their beliefs into practice (Epstein, 1992).

While traditional forms of family involvement have focused on the supposed deficits of low-income and/or minority families, new models, congruent with the Family-Centered Approach advocated in this paper, emphasize building on family strengths and developing partnerships with families, based on mutual responsibility. In these approaches, parents are involved as peers and collaborators, rather than clients. Fruchter, et al. (1992), have identified four tenets of programs which have been shown to improve the educational outcomes for all children, particularly those of low-income and minority children: 1) Parents are children's first teachers and have a life-long influence on children's values, attitudes, and aspirations; 2) Children's educational success requires congruence between what is taught at school and the values expressed in the home; 3) Most parents, regardless of economic status, educational level, or

cultural background, care deeply about their children's education and can provide substantial support if given specific opportunities and knowledge; and 4) Schools must take the lead in eliminating, or at least reducing, traditional barriers to parent involvement.

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